New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1948

Volume IX, Number 9 • Rachel W. Coffin, *Editor* • Week of April 5, 1948

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"Macbeth"

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New York
Theatre Critics' Reviews

Announces

1948 CRITICS' CIRCLE AWARD WINNERS

Best Play By An American Author

"A Streetcar Named Desire"

Best Play By A Foreign Author

"The Winslow Boy"

Complete reviews of "A Streetcar Named Desire" start on Page 249 (1947 Volume); complete reviews of "The Winslow Boy" start on Page 283 (1947 Volume).

NEW YORK THEATRE CRITICS' REVIEWS

"Macbeth"

The New York Times

APRIL 1, 1948

Michael Redgrave and Flora Robson in 'Macbeth'—Production at National Is Realistic

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Thanks to the initiative of Theatre Incorporated, a superb "Macbeth" has come to town. With Michael Redgrave and Flora Robson as the bloody monarchs of Scotland, it set up housekeeping last evening at the National, where it should keep open house for a long time. Under Norris Houghton's imaginative direction, it brings Shakespeare's great murder play to the stage intact in a vibrant performance that transmutes a classical ritual into a stunning and reverberant work of art. No one else in the contemporary theatre has drawn so much horror and ferocity out of it.

* * *

Without accenting modernism, it is a modern "Macbeth" played without traditional ceremony for the gore and fury Shakespeare wrote into it. Wasting no time on pageantry, Paul Sheriff has dressed his warriors in rough, field costumes, and the unostentatious settings are shadowy with death. Alan Bush has composed a long score that helps define the architecture of the performance. With these materials to work with Mr. Houghton has staged a rude, masculine, furious performance that for once successfully encompasses the weird scenes with the witches and that translates the scrappy battle scenes into a flowing pattern of physical combat.

There is no bookishness about this interpretation. To Mr. Redgrave, Macbeth is no classical hero but a mortal man who bites off more murder than he can assimilate. And to Miss Robson, Lady Macbeth is no preternatural heroine but the scheming wife of an ambitious adventurer. Although Miss Robson is an admirable actress with enormous intelligence and magnetism, her approach to the part does weaken one of the old war-horses of the theatre. There is more steel in the part than Miss Robson puts into her acting.

* * *

But the human approach suits Mr. Redgrave perfectly. Personally vigorous with a resonant voice he is not afraid to use with all the stops out, Mr. Redgrave plunges into a lusty characterization that has size and depth. Completely the master of the part, he develops Macbeth out of timorous ambition into the reckless violence of the climax. And, incidentally, the fight between Macbeth and Macduff is something more than stage dueling, but a desperate encounter that prowls all over the stage. When Macbeth's body falls with a sickening thud, you know that he is dead.

The cast is extraordinarily good throughout. Hector MacGregor as Ross, Geoffrey Toone as Banquo, Russell Collins as the drunken porter, Elliott Reid as Malcolm, Beatrice Straight as Lady Macduff, John McQuade as Siward, Arthur Keegan as young Siward and Paul Mann as the hired murderer give excellent performances. As Macduff, Whitfield Connor gives a remarkably rich and perceptive performance. The long cast cannot be composed of actors who are uniformly good. But amid the tension of the performance none of them is inadequate.

Now that "Macbeth" has been played with such terror and drive, the whole design looks logical and simple. It solves many awkward minor problems—not only the hell-hags, who have always sorely tried the credulity of modern theatregoers, but the problem of Banquo's ghost. In this production Banquo, with his throat cut and still bleeding, is terrifying and authentic.

There never was a murder play as sanguinary and lurid as "Macbeth." By acting it with swiftness, boldness and candor, Mr. Redgrave and Miss Robson have packed the evening with excitement. "The earth was feverous and did shake," Shakespeare said. So did the worn stage of the National Theatre.

'MACBETH.'

Play by William Shakespeare; directed by Norris Houghton; settings and costumes by Paul Sheriff; music composed by Alan Bush; musical director, Lehman Engel; presented by Theater, Incorporated, in association with Brian Doherty at the National Theater, Wednesday evening, March 31, 1948.

The cast:

Duncan, King of Scotland	Stephen Courtleigh
Malcolm	Elliott Reid
Donalbain	Michael Reilly
Macbeth	Michael Redgrave
Banquo	Geoffrey Toone
Macduff	Whitfield Connor
Lennox	John Cromwell
Ross	Hector MacGregor
Angus	John Straub
Mentelth	Paul Mann
Caithness	Thomas Palmer
Fleance	Ken Raymond
Siward	John McQuade
Young Siward	Arthur Keegan
Lady Macbeth	Flora Robson
Lady Macduff	Beatrice Straight
Son to Macduff	Judson Rees
A Wounded Sergeant	John McQuade
A Messenger at Inverness	Robinson Stone
The Porter at Inverness	Russell Collins
An Old Man	Blair Cutting
Seyton	Harry Hess
A Murderer	Paul Mann
His Younger Accomplice	Whit Vernon
A Lord	Lamont Johnson
A Murderer at Fife	Martin Balsam
A Doctor	Russell Collins
A Gentlewoman	Penelope Potter
Two Watchmen at Dunsinane	Michael Reilly, John Straub
A Singer	Arthur Keegan
A Page	Sonny Curven
The Three	Robinson Stone, Martin Balsam, Harry Hess
The Weird Sisters	Gillian Webb, Julie Harris, Ann Hegira
An Armed Head	Whitfield Connor
A Bleeding Child	Ken Raymond
A Child Crowned	Marcia Marcus

Gentlewomen, Servants, Soldiers, &c.: Alan McKirdy, Whit Vernon, Marcia Marcus, Sonny Curven.

Journal American

APRIL 1, 1948

Shakespeare Drama 'Definitely Uneven'

By ROBERT GARLAND

Let me confess that "Macbeth" has never been among my favorite William Shakespeare dramas. It has always seemed as if, having composed what he knew to be a contrived and unconvincing tragedy, the author put in the witches to make it more exciting. But, even when all witched up with the Weird Sisters and their tricky prophesies, it seldom manages to amount to more than a vehicle for a pair of stars to ride in.

At the National, Michael Redgrave and Flora Robson ride in it to the best of their abilities. Mr. Redgrave, making his three dimensional debut in America, is, of course, Macbeth. And Miss Robson, a round actress of standing in these United States, is Mr. Redgrave's lady. Betwen them, they make the William Shakespeare drama interesting but unimportant, jumping, as they do, from speech to speech from scene to scene.

In two parts and one fleeting intermission, this "Macbeth" is performed against settings by Paul Sheriff and music by Lehman Engel. Neither, I think, is by way of being helpful. Nor is Norris Houghton's devious direction.

On the other hand, Mr. Sheriff's costumes are, for the most part, stunning, along with the lighting which, although uncredited in programs at the National, may be his as well. I'd think so.

Good When Good,

Thanks and no thanks to all these things, the "Macbeth" that Theatre Incorporated, in association with Brian Doherty, has imported from England and set up at the National, is definitely uneven. When it's good, it's very, very good. When it's bad, it isn't. And it's best when Michael Redgrave and Flora Robson are handing out the piece's fine, familiar quotations, talking in his whiskers and her sleep. Especially the latter!

As if William Shakespeare's re-arranger weren't satisfied with the author's own conception of his opening witched up scene—"When shall we three meet again?" to the accompaniment of thunder, lightning and off-stage hurlyburly — three gentlemen witches have been added. Known simply as The Three, they stand with their backs to the audience admiring, as they should, Paul Sheriff's back drop for that open space in Scotland.

From then until Macduff comes on as King, bearing with him Macbeth's long lost head, things go their well known Macbethian way, with plotters, plots and counter-plots, battles, murders and sudden deaths, witches, apparitions and bleeding heads adding to the turmoil of the tale. But some of the wordage is beautiful and much of the drip of doom is timely.

Nice and Loud

Imagine Maurice Evans giving an imitation of Lawrence Olivier playing Oedipus and you'll have some idea of how Michael Redgrave's Thane of Glamis sounds. He looks better than he sounds, however, and, in his softer—which are his less actorial—moments, he's a Macbeth to place beside some other not-quite-first-raters you've known. Even when he doesn't act so good, he acts nice and loud—if the Howard brothers will pardon me!

Flora Robson, in a red wig and no mood for fooling, is a killer to remember. But she, too, is up-and-downy, marking time between her scenes and speeches. Her sleep-walking number, with more scenic hazards than Lady Macbeth can hold her candle to, brings down the house. As does Russell Collins' Porter who answers to the knocking on the gate at Inverness. Beatrice still plays Straight as Macduff's good lady.

The others, including Whitfield Connor as Macduff and Goeffrey Toone as Banquo, are somewhat lost among the cluttered up production. But, after all, this imported revival of a William Shakespeare drama is for the greater glory of Michael Redgrave and Flora Robson. It's a "Macbeth" you can take or leave, and think no more about it. I, personally, can leave it!

PM

APRIL 2, 1948

Kronenberger

'Macbeth' Is Marred By Macbeth Himself

What is chiefly wrong with the present *Macbeth* is the present Macbeth. Except for Michael Redgrave, this is a satisfactory and in some respects a striking production. It's not crucial that a few smaller roles are muffed. It's not too crucial that as Lady Macbeth, Flora Robson is less impressive than one hoped she might be. Miss Robson isn't good enough for Miss Robson; but she is merely a disappointment, not at all a disaster. And under Norris Houghten's direction, much of this *Macbeth* has a sombre and suitably Scottish spirit; it moves smoothly; and it boasts at least one minor triumph of performing: Russell Collins makes the best Porter I have ever seen.

* * *

But Mr. Redgrave remains, in a sense not previsioned by Shakespeare, the villain of the piece. For in the course of it he all but murders Macbeth as well as Duncan. His Macbeth is a sort of deep-throated, violent, increasingly immoderate barbarian. But there is somehow as much of rant about him as of reckless violence; so that the more Mr. Redgrave goes in for heavy villainy, the more he reveals himself as essentially a lightweight. Now and again one glimpses a competent performer in human-sized roles, but nothing that really jibes with Shakespeare. As for reading his lines, Mr. Redgrave definitely suggests some eleventh-century Scottish yelper; for he is certainly not at home with the finer uses of the English language. I would roughly hazard that Macbeth is given a large number of deeply poetic speeches than any other single character in Shakespeare; and if you would hear most of those speeches butchered, out of ineptness and incomprehension alike, go listen to Mr. Redgrave. Go listen for any half-dozen famous words—*She should have died hereafter*, let us say. Mr. Redgrave didn't let these words fall with the shrug of a nature emotionally numbed and morally calloused; he positively declaimed them—and what is more, declaimed them badly.

A *Macbeth* that is as much melodrama as tragedy is tolerable, perhaps inevitable, on the stage. But a Macbeth such as Mr. Redgrave offers us—and usually at a snail's pace—is not. We just can't sidestep the man of intense imagination that Shakespeare chose to set before us; the poetic usurper, the speculative murderer. There is indeed, as I think it was Frank Harris who pointed out, a good deal of Hamlet in Macbeth. But the affinity with Hamlet is not the merely neurotic one that Mr. Redgrave might be said to evoke at times, and that robs Macbeth of most of his stature and maturity. Mr. Redgrave, indeed, came off best in the well-fought final duel; so that of him, as of the preceding Thane of Cawdor, it might be said that

Nothing in his life
Became him like the leaving it.

* * *

Miss Robson's Lady Macbeth is solid, competent and well-spoken, but rather prosaic and unpersonalized: this might be any strong-minded woman at the first, any sore troubled woman at the end. There is a certain daring, a certain dimension lacking; it is just not Shakespearean enough. In most other respects, this *Macbeth* is up to scratch. Despite Mr. Redgrave's slowness, the production sweeps forward, as the play does, for three wonderful acts; and does not stagger, as the play does a bit, during the last two. The production also grasps the importance of atmosphere to *Macbeth*, and through the lighting and Mr. Sheriff's sets, maintains at least a sort of consistent tone. Among the secondary roles, Geoffrey Toone comes off nicely as Banquo, and Whitfield Connor even better as Macduff.

—Louis Kronenberger

New York World-Telegram

APRIL 1, 1948

'Macbeth'—a Walking Shadow

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

It is quite possible to read Shakespeare's "Macbeth" to yourself and cause an emotional upheaval as broad and deep as a tidal wave.

On the stage it is hard to make it trivial, but it is possible to play it like a series of squalls pelting the surface of the waves. This is what the new production of it resembles most of the time.

The combination of broad cutting and pacing the play in breathless spurts, leaves the actors little to work with. They are busily conscious of how they look and how thy sound, but you wonder if any of them is really thinking about what he is saying.

Popularizing Overdone.

You will recall that the play concerns Macbeth's ambition, and how, coupled with his Lady's murderous greed, it leads them into a series of endless crimes until they are destroyed.

It is a tight play, with a single relentless plot line. When an attempt is made further to personalize the drama, and to cut down the leading characters from heroic stature to recognizable size, it begins to resemble the story of Ruth Snyder and Judd Gray.

An effort to make a classic identifiable and familiar should be commendable, but it can be overdone. And people like Snyder and Gray could neither feel nor express themselves as the Macbeths do.

Both Flora Robson and Michael Redgrave as the leads start out too passionately. They race their lines and substitute a sort of bowling laryngitis for forceful meaning.

Speed entirely destroys the significance of the great key scene where Lady Macbeth spurs on her husband, who is quailing in horror at his vow to murder the King. Instead of a woman revealing dark terrible depths, she is a shrew who outtalks him.

Only after Banquo's murder is arranged does the performance relax. Here both artists gain power as their fear grows.

Second Act Improves.

The second act, which in this version follows the banquet scene, has many more effective moments than the whippet race of the first. Unfortunately the characters have already lost dignity and importance beyond reclaim.

Mr. Redgrave's scene as the witches reveal his cryptic fate is splendid for he plays with real and desperate passion.

Miss Robson's sleep walking scene is the first and the most absorbing illusion of the performance. She is ghastly as she rubs hands that might be sticky with resin, and a forlorn girl as she regrets the uselessness of Arabia's perfumes. There is gruesome reality in her repetition of a gesture she used with Macbeth in the earlier murder scene.

The final fight between Macbeth and Macduff is as brutal as it would be possible to stage, and keep the same actors for another performance.

Voice Unpleasant.

Mr. Redgrave's performance in particular, loses import through the use of vocal gymnastics. Strained ugly sounds may authentically express varied passions, but not when they become more important to listen to than the passions themselves.

Russell Collins is the sly and alcoholic porter and manages to imbue the character with an entirely fresh feeling. Beatrice Straight is a comely Lady Macduff, and Elliott Reid plays Malcolm with the youthful dignity of a highborn GI, which is exactly what Malcolm was, 900 years ago.

Of the whole cast no one is more consistently at home, or more effective, at reading lines to convey ideas, than Hector MacGregor, as Ross.

The witches here are real jazzy girls, and they bow to a trio of weirdly monumental boss men. The settings are dour and strong, and the music is a potent help to the mood.

This production conceives of "Macbeth" as a play about people younger than the ones usually represented, and aims to relate its melodrama to modern tempo. The result is an unfortunate inclination to make the play superficial and high schoolish.

New York Post

APRIL 1, 1948

The Latest 'Macbeth' Has Its Weaknesses

By RICHARD WATTS Jr.

Feeling rather like the unwelcome Banquo at Macbeth's feast, I must say that Theatre Incorporated's Anglo-American production of the Shakespeare tragedy, which opened at the National last night, struck me as lacking in stature and distinction. Under Norris Houghton's direction, it had movement and considerable vitality, which are commendable virtues. But its stars, Michael Redgrave and Flora Robson, were only intermittently impressive, and I thought there was missing from their performances the fire and eloquence which was to have been expected. The new "Macbeth" is not a bore, but it isn't properly exciting, either.

Having seen Mr. Redgrave twice on the stage and several times on the screen, I confess that he puzzles me as an actor. Clearly he possesses both intelligence and imagination, and there are times when he can be strikingly effective. Yet he is a very uneven performer, who can do one Shakespearean speech movingly and let the next go almost by default. There is something oddly disturbing about the way he moves from dramatic expertness to confusion and then back again, and his Macbeth is alternately commendable and questionable. On the whole, its defect is a lack of tragic power and consistent eloquence.

Miss Robson

Miss Robson faced an enormous handicap last night, because it was on the same stage and in the same role a few years ago that Judith Anderson gave the most exciting portrayal of Lady Macbeth in the memory of this theatre-going generation. Even granting her difficulty, however, she seemed strangely placid and lacking in forcefulness. Long known both here and in London for her dramatic power, Miss Robson was baleful without being moving. Where Miss Anderson's sleep-walking scene and her cry to be made stern and merciless made one's hair stand on end, Miss Robson left at least this spectator remarkably calm.

Indeed, the most interesting performances last night were in the smaller roles. Best of all was Russell Collins, whose portrayal of the drunken porter, who answers the celebrated knocking at the door, was an unusual achievement in giving life and humor to a brief and incidental part. Then, too, Whitford Connor was a consistently effective Macduff, and Beatrice Straight was excellent in the short scene alloted the murdered Lady Macduff. We all know how frequently the minor characters are slighted in a Shakespearean production, and Theatre Incorporated's refusal to do so is deserving of praise.

The Staging

There are many excellent qualities in Mr. Houghton's staging. As I have said, it has movement and vitality. The idea of playing "Macbeth" for the savage melodrama of primitive Scotland, which, among other things, it is, makes good sense, and the current presentation sets out sagely to capture the proper medieval atmosphere. On the other hand, some of the direction, particularly that appearance of the ghost of Banquo at the feast, was less imaginative than it might have been, and I found the scenes of the weird sisters not altogether satisfactory.

In the end, however, there is nothing wrong about this "Macbeth" that two performances of greater stature in the leading roles could not have remedied. There is not only some of the most stirring tragedy in all Shakespeare in the tale of the rise and fall of the murderously ambitious family. There is also some of the most moving eloquence. I am afraid that the distinguished visitors from London brought to their playing of two tremendous roles enough of neither the tragic nor the verbal beauty required to make "Macbeth" seem the tremendous drama it really is.

Daily Mirror

APRIL 1, 1948

New 'Macbeth' Is Workmanlike

By ROBERT COLEMAN

Theatre Incorporated, in association with Brian Doherty, brought a workmanlike production of "Macbeth" to the National Theatre last evening. "Macbeth" is one of Shakespeare's greatest plays and it should have a great production. But if you can't get a great one, you have to settle for the best you get.

The current production is known as the Norris Houghton production, because it was directed by Houghton in both England and America. For the film fans, however, it probably will be known as the Michael Redgrave production, because Redgrave, its star, has, like Ronald Colman and Loretta Young, won himself a coveted Hollywood "Oscar."

Redgrave's performance in the title role is uneven, but it has the merit of improving as it rambles along. It is most often keyed to the conversational tone, though it does occasionally take wings and give the magnificent Shakespearean verse the glowing reading it demands.

Flora Robson, in our book, is a fine actress in such modern plays as "Ladies in Retirement" but a mediocre one as Lady Macbeth. Seldom does she achieve the superbly sinister, villainous, masterful quality of the dominant partner in regal massacre.

Though Shakespeare titled his rousing tragedy "Macbeth," there are some of us who wouldn't mind if it were retitled "Lady Macbeth." For Lady Macbeth certainly is the master-mind in this Elizabethan version of Murder, Inc.

Miss Robson's reading of the famous sleepwalking scene was placid and remarkably unemotional. She never made us feel that she cared very much whether the perfumes of Arabia could or could not wash the blood from her dainty hands.

Redgrave really took command in the last act. His battle to the death with Whitfield Connor's MacDuff was a thriller. Connor, incidentally, has a resonant voice that can make a Shakespearean line vibrate. But for too much of the evening, "Macbeth" seemed a towering ship in search of a skipper with authority.

The reliable Russell Collins is excellent as the inebriated porter, who offers the only comedy relief in the tragedy. He knows how to cope with Shakespearean "fool."

Stephen Courtleigh acts the brief role of Duncan with kindly, kingly dignity.

The settings by Paul Sheriff are chunks of bold, raw color. They can be quickly changed and obviate distracting lulls. They also serve to set off some of the colorful costumes.

"Macbeth" is a mighty organ, capable of wondrous, stirring music, but Houghton's large cast hasn't mastered all its stops.

DAILY NEWS

APRIL 1, 1948

Robson, Redgrave Put New Thrills Into a Super-Thriller, 'Macbeth'

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Shakespeare's surest-fire thriller, "Macbeth," is being given a sure-fire performance at the National Theatre—thanks mostly, but not altogether, to the playing of Michael Redgrave and Flora Robson. There is delicious excitement in their maniacal portrayals of General and Lady Macbeth, and there are pleasures besides in the staging, settings, costumes and music of the melodrama.

It is, I would say, a thoroughly enjoyable "Macbeth," and one of the most competent productions of Shakespeare in recent seasons. It has pomp and color; it has been adroitly edited and cleverly maneuvered on the stage, and it moves like an Alfred Hitchcock chase. Ranking right up with the two leading players as stars of the production are Norris Houghton, making his debut as a director, and Paul Sheriff, the scenic artist.

Redgrave's Range Wide.

Mr. Sheriff—who did the splendid setting for John Gielgud's "Crime and Punishment"—has devised a swiftly changing complexity of backdrops which eliminates the greatest occupational hazard of the Shakespearean super. In most